

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, March 12, 1901

Volta Bureau, March 12, 1901. Dear Mabel: —

I am going off tonight to Northampton to attend a meeting of the Board of Corporators, and shall probably be gone for a few days. As I won't have Miss Safford at hand to typewrite for me I think I better take this opportunity of saying a few words. I have been too busy to write today. It is now evening, and Duncan downstairs and Aileen upstairs are here to chaperon your humble servant and Miss S., so it is all right for me to say a few words while I have the chance.

There has been a good deal of controversy over the invention of the telephone since the death of Elisha Gray. Munsey's Magazine seems to have started it with that unfair article which you saw. Then came a number of newspaper notices, then the sudden death of Elisha Gray and then one of the electrical journals published an extract from a letter written by Elisha Gray a few days before his death, which seems to indicate that he went down to his grave with the idea that he had shown me how to make the telephone, in quite forgetfulness of the fact that the specifications for my patent had been prepared in 1875 and had been for a long time in the hands of Messrs. Pollock & Bailey in Washington by whom the papers were forwarded to me in Boston to be sworn to and that they were sworn to there in January 1876. All this, of course, came out in the evidence. It also came out that Elisha Gray only obtained the idea which he incorporated in his caveat the same day it was written² and that it was written the day it was filed, viz: Feb. 14, 1876, the same day my long delayed specification was filed in the Patent Office.

These undoubted facts render it quite immaterial whether the caveat was filed before or after my specification — excepting for the purposes of technical proceedings in the Patent Office—Of course we know that it was filed after, and Gray himself admitted this at a time

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when this was fresh within his recollection. But quite independently of this, the papers in the case show that my specification was fully prepared and in the hands of my solicitors in Washington LONG BEFORE Gray had conceived of the idea set forth in his caveat.

The date of the filing of the caveat is quite immaterial regarding the question of priority of invention, and only concerns the legal technicality as to whether the Patent Office was right in declaring an interference between my patent and his caveat. The interference was declared, but upon examining the matter it was found that the caveat papers were received after my specification had been filed and hence — technically — the Office had erred in declaring there was an interference. The interference was therefore then dissolved and my patent was allowed to go to issue.

But the damage had already been done — the interference HAD been declared, and Gray was notified of the interference — told of my specification — and invited (if he desired the interference to go on) to replace his caveat by an application for a patent. The evidence brought out the fact that he was urged to do this, and failed to do it.

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If I remember rightly, the evidence also brought out the fact that my specification, or portions of it, had been shown to Gray's solicitors, so that he received definite information as to the nature of my application and the points of interference; whereas the caveat being considered as a confidential document was not shown to any one on my side of the case, and when I went down to Washington and asked the examiner wherein lay the point of interference, he would only indicate, by pointing to the clause in MY patent, which described it and with which the caveat had been declared to conflict.

A great deal has been made of the coincidence that the caveat and patent were filed upon the same day, ignoring entirely the more important fact that the specification had been sworn to in Boston BEFORE GRAY HAD CONCEIVED THE VAGUE IDEA EXPRESSED

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IN HIS CAVEAT — let alone the fact that it was prepared before it was sworn to, and, as the evidence shows — LONG BEFORE THAT DATE

Hence the exact time when the caveat was filed has nothing to do with the question of priority of invention. It might have been filed a month before, or months before, without interfering with my claim to be the first inventor of any form of speaking telephone, and the originator of the whole art of reproducing speech by electrical means. The only effect that an earlier filing of the caveat would have had upon my case would have been to delay the granting of my patent until the question of interference had been decided by the Patent Office.

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Aileen is beginning to fidget and thinks I am nearly at the end of this letter, when I have really only fairly begun. Well, I suppose I better stop, and will simply say upon this subject that Mr. Maynard seems to have taken up the cudgels in my defence. He has written three articles for the Electrical Review (of N. Y.) which are admirable in matter and in manner. I enclose a copy of a letter I have written to Mr. Maynard upon the subject, but WHICH HAS NOT YET BEEN SENT — and probably never will be. Of course I realize that whatever I say at this time will be sure to find its way into print some day, and that I had therefore better be careful as to what I do say. I feel the lack of competent advisers, and miss the wise head and kind heart of Mr. Hubbard.

It suddenly occurred to me this afternoon that I had A BOY, and that this was an occasion upon which I could ask his help. Bert came up upon telephonic notice, and thought upon first reading that the letter had better not be sent. He then became more doubtful of the matter, but was quite sure that the last paragraph was inexpedient, so I have cut it out, and have signed the letter and placed it in his hands so that he can think over it tonight and read Mr. Maynard's articles in the Electrical Review. If he thinks it is all right he is to send it to Miss Safford tomorrow to be press copied and SENT. In the meantime I send you a copy for your information.

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I also send a note received from Mr. Rathbun, expressing Prof. Langley's congratulations on the adoption of the Smithsonian recommendations relating to the Departments of the Government, and "recognizing the propriety of this legislation."

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ITEM: —

Now that I have withdrawn my objection to the new Wisconsin movement, Spencer is quoting me for all he is worth. See circular enclosed concerning "Wisconsin System of Public Day Schools for the Deaf".

Last night I happened to catch sight of a little pamphlet carefully tucked away under the drawing board on the table here, and wondering what it was that Miss Safford had hidden there, I fished it out and found it a sort of tract "Our Beliefs and Some of the Reasons for them", by Rev. James T. Bixby, published by the American Unitarian Association of Boston. As I had never seen any exposition of the beliefs of the Unitarian, I thought I would dip into it and see what it was all about, and made the discovery that I was myself a Unitarian and did not know it, for I don't have any beliefs and agree thoroughly with Pope when he says:—

"Say first, of God above, or man below What can we reason, but from what we KNOW".

On matters unknowable I don't profess to know. I have always considered myself as an Agnostic — which of course I am, but I have now discovered that I am a Unitarian Agnostic.

I enclose a few quotations. I am hardly able to keep Aileen down in her seat, and so must say good bye. Aileen says: — "It is quarter to ten and time for good people to be in bed". All right, good night.

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Your loving husband Alec.